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Calfed floats Peripheral Canal project

Jason Sumner
Appeal-Democrat

Declaring a "new water ethic" in California, state and federal officials released a report Monday that favors a new Peripheral Canal to help restore the heart of the state's water system, but stops short of fully endorsing the potentially divisive project.

More than a dozen government agencies known as Calfed unveiled a 3,500 page interim report outlining alternatives to fix problems in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a web of natural and man-made waterways that provides two-thirds of the state's drinking water and irrigates more than 7 million acres of farmland.

"We are at an extraordinary moment in the history of California's water system," U.S. Interior Department Deputy Secretary John Garamendi said during a press conference in Sacramento. "We're looking at a strategy that will develop multiple winners and that is new in California. It is indeed a new water ethic."

But already the new ethic is running into old conflicts. Some of California's most powerful political forces - agriculture, urban water users and environmentalists - remain skeptical that Calfed can satisfy their water needs and find solutions to deteriorating delta levees, and encroaching seawater and shrinking fish populations.

Chief among the proposed solutions is an "isolated facility," a trimmed-down version of the Peripheral Canal, which state voters rejected in 1982. It would start on the Sacramento River south of Sacramento and border the east side of the delta, ending at the State Water Project pumps near Tracy.

Monday's report includes the isolated facility in the third of three alternatives.

"Alternative three appears to have the potential to provide greater performance. ... At the same time, however, alternative three appears to present the most serious challenges in terms of assurances and implementability," the report says.

Garamendi stressed that Calfed hasn't yet decided on the isolated facility.

"There is no preferred alternative," he said. "There is no choice at this moment. And we have to put together the political equation, as well as the environmental and engineering equation over the next several months so that we can achieve a solution that will be a win, win, win and win."

In addition to the canal, the alternatives include more water storage, fish screens and improving the flow of existing water channels.

Another report is due in the fall that will choose a preferred alternative. But already agricultural and environmental representatives believe Calfed will eventually settle on the canal.

"We believe at this point that alternative three appears to be the one Calfed will select," Northern California Water Association Executive Director Rich Golb said after the press conference.

The association represents 65 agricultural water suppliers and farmers who irrigate about 850,000 acres of farmland in Northern California.

"People in Northern California should definitely be somewhat skeptical of the Calfed plan," he said.

"The history of the canal alone justifies some concern. The canal drags a lot of history with it that creates a lot of ill will and fear in the north. ... But skepticism isn't the same as cynicism. We shouldn't be cynical, we should be skeptical. We shouldn't jump to any conclusions prematurely."

Forrest Sprague, chief of staff to state Sen. Maurice Johannessen, R-Redding, said he is concerned the report doesn't focus enough on new reservoirs.

"It's not Sen. Johannessen being opposed to the Calfed process in the general sense," Sprague said.